



# PSYCHOTIC REACTION

AGORAPHOBIC,  
PRONE TO  
VIOLENT OUTBURSTS  
AND WILDLY  
UNPREDICTABLE,  
THE VINES'  
CRAIG NICHOLLS  
HAS ALL THE  
MAKINGS OF A  
MAJOR  
ROCK ICON.

BY ALAN DI PERNA  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE



**"YEAH, WE HAVE A SPLIT PERSONALITY,"** acknowledges Vines leader Craig Nicholls. "But hopefully," he adds, after one of his characteristically long pauses, "it all melts into one thing." • Nicholls' statement applies as psycho-logical makeup. Musically, the Vines juxtapose the raw aggression of Nineties grunge with the sunny bliss of Sixties guitar pop and psychedelia, a yin/yang combination they exploited to brilliant effect on their 2002 debut, *Highly Evolved*, and which they've honed to new heights of edgy perfection on their new album, *Winning Days* (Capitol). Nicholls—the band's singer, main guitarist and songwriter—makes his six strings slash like broken glass on the new album's first single, "Ride," and roar with bestial anger on the explosive closer "Fuck the World." But he can also use the instrument to call down shimmering warbles straight from heaven, inducing pure pop euphoria on spellbinders like "Rainfall" and "Sun Child."

As for the mercurial Mr. Nicholls himself, he's known for a similar polarity of rage and relaxation. There are countless tales of tantrums, trashed dressing rooms, drinks dashed in publicists' faces, and band mates brained with foreign objects. When he's not throwing a fit, some accounts allege, Nicholls

lapses into a catatonic stupor, self-medicating with marijuana. But Craig also has a sweet side—boyish, thoughtful and lucid, although he's never a man to waste words.

The rock and roll he loves most also comes from a place where yowling angst coexists with pristine three-part harmony. The Vines are heirs to a tradition that began with the Beatles,

Rolling Stones, Who and Kinks, and has found its most recent expression in present day garage and rock and roll resurgence bands. Asked to name his favorite current groups, Nicholls answers without hesitation: "The Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, Superglass, the White Stripes and Yeah Yeah Yeahs."

It's a tradition he was literally born into. His father was the leader of Australian Sixties garage rockers the Vynes, from whom Craig drew the name of his own group. Growing up in suburban Hurstville, Australia, just outside Sydney, young Craig delved headfirst into the parental record collection. But he's no Sixties rock purist: "Almost everything I listen to is new," says Nicholls. "The Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Kinks and Jimi Hendrix are probably the only four groups from the Sixties that I can even name. The Kinks in particular had such great songwriting and are so underrated today. I'm obsessed with the Kinks. But also the Stone Temple Pilots."

Growing up in Australia, Nicholls did not experience the great divide that split American and British rock during the early Nineties. As a result, Britpop stalwarts like Blur, Verve

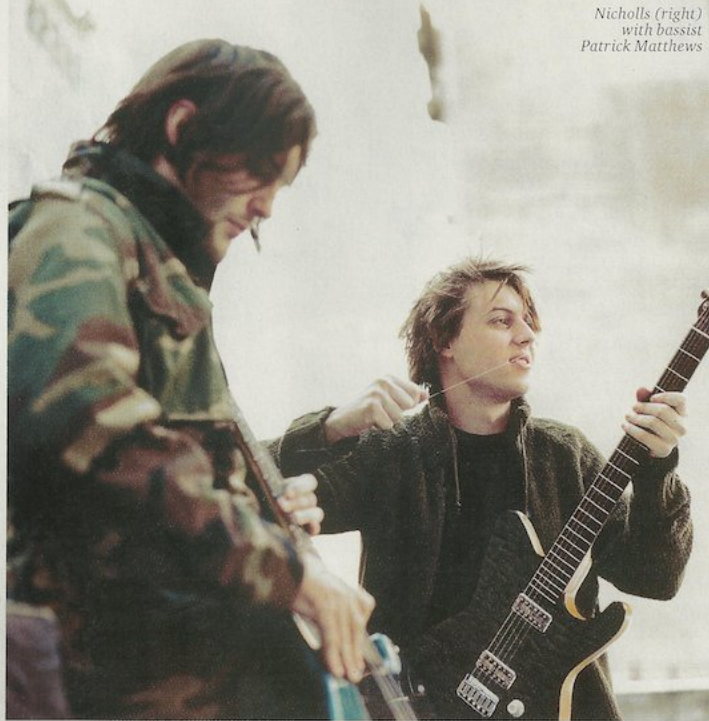
and Suede mean just as much to him as American grunge icons like Nirvana and Stone Temple Pilots. All of which gives him a unique perspective as a songwriter. He's built his creative world around two of rock's most significant decades—the Sixties and the Nineties, which history may well come to regard as the alpha and omega of meaningful rock and roll. Because it takes in a broad swath of time, Nicholls' musical vision has breadth of scope. But by sticking mainly to the major landmarks of both his favorite decades, he has avoided geeky obscurantism. He writes populist stuff—easy to love.

There's a kind of purity in Nicholls' musical outlook, maybe because he's such an insular person. Riding in cars freaks him out—"They go too fast; it makes my brain hurt"—so he doesn't often venture outside the domestic cocoon. "Even when I'm back home in Australia," he says, "I just like staying at home. It's easiest for me. I can play guitar, write songs or whatever I want."

So imagine what it was like for the reclusive Nicholls to be discovered in 2001, and whisked halfway around the world to cut *Highly Evolved* in



Nicholls (right) with bassist Patrick Matthews





**"I'm being kind of sarcastic when I say 'Fuck the world,' but there's a darker side of me where I do mean it."**

the heart of Hollywood. Accustomed to recording at home on a four-track portable studio, Nicholls suddenly found himself amid state-of-the-art luxury at the Sunset Sound Factory, rock history oozing from every corner. And when he went out the studio door, he was smack in the middle of one of the world's most bizarrely artificial cities. "I feel like a fish out of water in L.A.," he says, "but I guess it was meant to be Hollyweird."

And so there was trouble. Tempers flared as sessions for the album dragged on. Drum-

mer David Olliffe quit the band in a huff, and was replaced by the Vines' current drummer, Hamish Rosser. Still, when the album was finally finished, it was well received and went on to sell 1.5 million copies. But the aggravation was just beginning. Nicholls did not cotton to touring and showed very little patience with music biz rituals like meet-and-greets, TV appearances and interviews. Though his debut album had just been completed, Nicholls already had a whole slew of new songs in his head and he wanted to go back into the studio to capture them. He was afraid that he'd never

get to commit all his ideas to disc.

"I don't want to lose my voice or my hearing before I get a chance to follow through on all the ideas I have with this band," he said in 2002. "I have to start taking medication just so I can stop worrying about it."

The Vines' touring schedule finally ground to a halt during the summer of last year, when the band traveled directly from London—where they'd played the tour's final date—to the legendary Bearsville Studios in upstate New York, near the hippie mecca of Woodstock. It was felt that Bearsville's woody environs would have a calming effect on Craig. He is said to like trees and nature. "We spotted a lot of turkeys, bears and deer," he says with childlike fascination. The rural resort setting gave the band an opportunity to decompress from touring, while also getting down to serious studio work—always the big priority for Craig.

In addition to bassist Patrick Matthews, and second guitarist Ryan Griffiths, the Bearsville *Winning Days* sessions reunited Nicholls with producer Rob Schnapf (Beck, Foo Fighters) who had also helmed the recording of *Highly Evolved*. Part of Schnapf's production role with the Vines has been to act as "older guy guitar guru." "Rob owns a lot of cool guitars that he brought into the studio," says Craig. "We had about 20 of them there. My main guitar was a Telecaster, but there was also a Strat, three different Guilds and a Gibson Les Paul. For amps, we had a Marshall stack and a Fender Twin Reverb, but Rob also had a whole lot of really old-school amps, which were small and weird sounding, but they seemed to work on some of the songs."

*Winning Days* is a sure-footed, beautifully realized piece of work, owing to a new confidence that Nicholls attributes to the band's growing studio experience and ability to undercut the kind of tensions that made *Highly Evolved* so traumatic to record. While it contains some great singles, *Days* is also an album in the classic sense: a musical journey that takes in the rough and the smooth, the cooked and the raw, moving the listener through variegated styles and moods. "It's a really weird and unexpected trip," says Nicholls. "It takes you by surprise."

"Ride" launches the album in full throttle grunge mode, a momentum that continues with the second tune, "Animal Machine," where Nicholls offsets Nirvana-esque verses with a reverb-drenched, acid-melt guitar solo that feels like a flashback to Texas garage-psych purveyors the Thirteenth Floor Elevators. As if to keep the listener guessing, Craig throws some "bop bop doo wop" choruses into the musical maelstrom.

"It's like something from the Fifties," he laughs. "It just seemed crazy to put it there. I love songs with weird vocal sounds—those

# SOIL

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**"Revolution" is about the state the world is in, but it's also about the state of mind that I was in at the time I wrote it."**

"ba" or "la" old school, doo-wop kind of words.

That was one of the last things to go on the song. On their own I think those vocals would sound too sweet, but with the heavy guitars, it sounds kinda strange."

Nicholls' songwriting and arranging is all about contrasts. "TV Pro," song number three, derives its strange energy from jump-cut tempo changes. Floaty, psychedelic verses alternate with driving, buzzsaw choruses. "I was watching TV when I came up with the idea for 'TV Pro,'" says Nicholls. "But we were all surprised by the way it turned out. Coincidentally, we used an amp on it that was called a TV Pro [probably a late Forties, tweed "TV-front" Fender Pro]."

The album hits its darkest moment five songs in, with the heavy, ominous, minor-key "Evil Town." Then, having struck emotional rock bottom, the disc undergoes an abrupt mood swing—a kundalini rush of pure bliss called "Winning Days." Craig likes to point out that, on vinyl records, the sixth track would be the first song on the album's second side, typically the place where Sixties-through-Eighties artists would shift creative gears in some significant way. "Winning Days" is an unabashedly euphoric ode to childhood inno-

cence, garlanded with chiming carousel backing vocals, synthesized strings, a great guitar solo, a faux ending, glorious reentry and languid outro. "I was so excited when I sang it in the studio," says Nicholls, "and it just hit me that the album was going to be called *Winning Days*, because that felt so positive. The song says, 'The winning days are gone,' but it doesn't matter. The melody is happy."

Guitar pop splendor reigns supreme on the next four songs, from the Kinky "She's Got Something to Say," to the trippy, 12-string-embroidered "Rainfall" and "Sun Child," to the Beatles-esque/Floyd ballad "Amnesia," which ends in layer upon layer of heady feedback. "That came from one of the old effects machines that Rob brought into the studio," says Craig. "There's a backward guitar going through it, but it's not really a guitar part in the end. It's just feedback that keeps on oscillating, and we ran it through this cool old machine."

Having lulled the listener, the album ends with a big, rude bang. As its title might suggest, "Fuck the World" is the nastiest piece of work on the disc—all distorted bass, gigantor riffs and throat-shredding rage. Tree loving Craig seems to be venting anger at what's being done to the environment, but in a lyrical

cal move akin to John Lennon's "...count me out...in" on "Revolution," Nicholls ping-pongs between nihilism ("C'mon, fuck the world") and cautionary irony ("Fuck the world...don't.") "That song is about the state the world is in," says Nicholls, "but it's also about the state of mind that I was in at the time I wrote it. I'm being kind of sarcastic when I say 'Fuck the world,' but there's a darker side of me where I do mean it."

That mixture of rage and poetic ambiguity is just one of the reasons why Nicholls has often been tagged as "the new Kurt Cobain." The video for "Ride," with its gymnasium setting and youthful mob scene, seems a deliberate riff on Nirvana's famous "Smells Like Teen Spirit" clip. Nearly every conceivable youth culture is represented in the Vines' version of "here we are now, entertain us." Punks, goths, geeks, riot grls, jazzmen, funkateers and country pickers all bash away on Nicholls' anthemic "ride with me" chorus. Like Cobain's work, Nicholls' songs have an across-the-board appeal that can make indie rockers and metalheads all take notice. You might call that schizophrenia, but perhaps for Nicholls it's just a kind of balance. There may be a part of him that wants to say, "Fuck the world," but even he admits that "more than 50 percent of me says, 'No, don't.'" ■

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